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'National' and 'Official' Languages of the Independent Asia-Pacific

Rowena G. Ward

University of Wollongong, roward@uow.edu.au

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

'National' and 'Official' Languages Across the Independent Asia-Pacific

Rowena Ward

Corresponding author: Dr Rowena Ward, School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, University of Wollongong, Northfields Ave Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia. Email: roward@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

In November 2018 New Caledonians went to the polls to vote on whether the French territory should become an independent state. In accordance with the terms of the 1998 Noumea Accord between Kanak pro-independence leaders and the French government, New Caledonians will have the opportunity to vote on the same issue again in 2020 and should they vote for independence, a new state will emerge. In another part of Melanesia, the people of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARB) will vote on 23 November 2019 on whether to secede from Papua New Guinea and form an independent state. With the possibility of two new independent states in the Pacific, the possible political and economic consequences of a vote for independence have attracted attention but little consideration has been paid to the question of which languages might be used or adopted should either territory, or both, choose independence. This article explores the question of language choice, specifically whether in several decolonized countries in the Asia-Pacific a choice has been made to designate 'national' and / or 'official languages or not. It first examines the concepts of 'national' and 'official' languages of a select number of independent countries in order to consider the possible linguistic configurations which could eventuate should residents of New Caledonia and/or Bougainville vote for independence. It then surveys how national and official languages are adopted by states post-independence, and how this relates to concepts of national identity. It returns to consider the linguistic options for New Caledonia and Bougainville, should they choose to become independent.

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Keywords:

National Language; Official Language; Independence; Decolonisation; Pacific

With elections on independence occurring in two separate locations (New Caledonia and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville) in the Pacific and therefore the possibility of two new independent states coming into being in the near future, there has been considerable media and scholarly focus on the possible political, economic and social effects consequences of a vote for independence in either location, and what the future might be ([Fisher 2018](#); [Maclellan and Regan 2018](#); [Robertson 2018](#); [Woodbury 2015](#)). Little attention, however, has been paid to the question of which languages might be used or adopted should either New Caledonia or Bougainville, or both, choose independence.

The Asia-Pacific region, used here to denote countries in South East Asia and the Western Pacific Ocean, is politically, economically, socially and linguistically diverse. It includes countries with very large populations (Indonesia) and some with very small populations (Tuvalu) and hosts more than 20 percent of the world's languages. This includes Vanuatu which, with a population of around 272,000, is home to some 130+ separate languages, and the island of New Guinea where over 1,000 languages are spoken.

Few countries in the Asia-Pacific region were not colonised by European powers. Thailand and Tonga remained formally independent but others were brought under colonial rule in a variety of forms. The colonial history resonates through the contemporary linguistic landscape, and the countries discussed below, all of which became independent after 1945, demonstrate the choices of languages made in pursuit of ideological and practical goals. The Asia-Pacific is still in the process of decolonisation, and some countries are still relatively young. The Federated States of Micronesia for example, was only created in 1994 following decades of administration by the United States of America as a UN Trust Territory.

For an independent state, the choice of a language carries important political and social considerations as a common language (or languages) plays an important role in nation-building and achieving a cohesive national identity. Such a decision has an important role in the construction of what Benedict Anderson called an 'imagined community' (1981). It is also an affirmation of state sovereignty, as the decision to adopt a national or official language (or not to adopt, or defer the decision) is a political choice. With two potential new independent states in the foreseeable future it is timely to consider the linguistic options that are available.

National and Official Languages in Independent States

At independence, or in the lead up to independence, political leaders have the opportunity to choose the national and / or official languages for the new state or none at all.¹ A 'national language' is commonly chosen to represent the 'nation' whilst an 'official language' is one that is designated by the state for use in government documents, acts of parliament, court proceedings and so on. Where the national and official language(s) are specified in legal instruments such as the constitution, they have *de jure* status but where their use is established through use or function but not legally specified, they are *de facto* national and/or official. The use of English in Australia is one example of both a *de facto* national *and* official language: it is widely used

¹ Sign languages are not discussed in this article although they are a *de facto* official language in some countries, such as Papua New Guinea.

and is the language of government and the courts, but has never been legally designated as the country's official language. Across the Tasman Sea, Maori is spoken by fewer people than English in Aotearoa New Zealand, but since the introduction of the Maori Language Act in 1987, is an official language together with English.² English was the *de facto* national and official language until then as part of an attempt to foreground the country's indigenous culture in a privileged bi-culturalism (Spoonley et al. 2003).

The former condominium of New Hebrides (Vanuatu since 1980) was one of the few places governed concurrently by two colonial powers (United Kingdom and France), a situation which has led to a lasting linguistic division across the independent state. With two colonial languages spoken in different parts of the new state, in the lead up to independence, Vanuatu's pro-independence leaders chose to adopt Bislama—a hitherto disparaged pidgin—as the state's national language (Thomas 1990; see below). English and French, together with Bislama, were made official languages.

Whilst all states which opt to adopt a national language also make it their official language, some states have no national language but a number of official languages (for example, Fiji) and some do not specify either (for example, Solomon Islands). Some states also utilise the concept of 'working languages' that are neither national nor official but are used to communicate with staff of external organisations, many of whom do not speak the national or official languages.³ An example of working languages can be found in Timor-Leste where both Indonesian and English were used as working languages during the years when it was under United Nations administration (see below).

It is important to note that the concepts of national and official languages are unrelated to the linguistic notions of a pidgin, creole and dialect. A pidgin is a created language, often borrowing heavily from one, two or more languages to create a means of communication between people from different language backgrounds. A pidgin, which is never spoken as a first language (hereafter L1) by any of its speakers, is not comprehensive enough to cover all topics of communication (Volker 2015: 4–5) and, despite its effectiveness as a means of communication, is commonly viewed negatively by speakers of a more dominant language. Over time, a pidgin may develop sufficiently to be used in a broader range of topics, at which time children begin to grow up speaking it as their L1. At such time, a pidgin has become a creole. Bislama—the national and official language of Vanuatu—is one such an example: it contains words from English, French and several Ni-Vanuatu languages, and is spoken at home by 34 percent of the population (Vanuatu Census 2009: xii). In Honiara, Solomons Pijin emerged as a useful means of communication between the 80 or so language groups present, but over time, children have grown up speaking it as their L1 and hence it is now a creole (even though it continues to be called 'pijin'). Importantly, pidgins and creoles are not dialects or derivatives of a language with links to a specific region and / or social group.

Despite the importance of language, discussions about the language(s) for the potential new state are often not prioritised by agitators for independence. This is despite language often being at the heart of how a community justifies its difference from the population from which it wishes to become independent and/or how it manifests its resistance to the government.

2 The Maori Language Act was revised in 2016.

3 This concept of a 'working language' differs from the legal status of 'procedural' languages used in supranational organisations, such as the United Nations.

The East Timorese for instance, used both Portuguese and Tetum languages in their resistance against the Indonesian occupation of their country (see below).

The choice of languages for a newly independent state is a political decision. As argued by Dardjowidjojo, the decision on a national language ‘is determined not so much by linguistic as by political and social factors’ (1998: 35). The state can be deliberately inclusive, for example when making a decision to adopt a widely used local language, or it can be deliberately exclusive, for example when it is decided not to adopt the language of the former colonial administration. The choice can be pragmatic or more precisely, made with the view to nation-building. The decision to adopt Bislama as the national language of Vanuatu, for instance, meant that neither English nor French speakers were prioritised over the other, whilst a local language was prioritised. Conversely, Papua New Guinea’s decision not to designate a national language meant that no one language was given precedence over others.

The national language is always an official language, but the reverse is not necessarily the case. As noted earlier some countries have only a national language which is also the official language (Indonesia), others have no national language but a number of official languages (Fiji) and some do not specify either (Solomon Islands). In Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia (hereafter Indonesian) is both the *de jure* national and *de jure* official language (see below). In many cases across the Asia-Pacific region, the language of the former colonial power is, at least, an official language (Fiji). Whilst rare, the official language can be a non-local indigenous or introduced language which is not the language of the former colonial power, for example, Fiji Hindi which is a local variant of Hindi and an official language in Fiji (see below).

The selection of the national and official languages can lead to a hierarchy in the status or standing of languages with the languages chosen assuming a higher status than those which are not. The status applies irrespective of the regularity of use. A pidgin for example, may be widely used but it is rarely the national or official language. A negative relative status can see speakers of other languages develop pessimistic attitudes towards the language(s) they speak, which in turn, can cause them to use the higher status language more often. This language shift can result in language loss as speakers increasingly use the higher status language at the expense of their L1.⁴ The designation of a language as a national and / or official language can contribute to this language shift. In the next section I discuss a number of states that have *de jure* national or official languages.

Official and National Language Countries

The countries covered here are not exhaustive and have been chosen to illustrate the diversity of language configurations across the region.

INDONESIA

Indonesia serves as an important case study for any discussion of language choice in the Asia-Pacific as it has a history of being both the colonised (by both the Netherlands and Japan) and a coloniser. The Dutch were present in the Indonesian archipelago from the late 16th century, and the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company) began establishing small trading colonies across the archipelago from 1619. The Nederlands(ch)-Indië (Netherlands East-Indies) was formed officially under Dutch government rule in 1800

⁴ Language loss can also be the result of policies which deliberately suppress the use of a language.

when the areas owned by the VOC were nationalised. While Dutch was the language of administration and of education for local Dutch children and the children of non-Dutch elites, it was never widely spoken.

Upon occupying the Netherlands East Indies in March 1942, the Japanese authorities banned the use of Dutch in both public and private (Brown 2003: 141). Whilst the Japanese authorities' medium-to-long term plan was to make Japanese the national language, it recognised that it was not feasible in the short-term. As well as sponsoring nationalist anti-colonial movements the Japanese made Indonesian⁵ the language of education, administration and media and consequently texts which had previously only been available in Dutch were translated into Indonesian for the first time (Pauuw 2009). Accompanying this development was a rapid expansion in the Indonesian lexicon (Simpson 2007: 327). The Japanese occupation thus enabled the spread and development of Indonesian. According to Teeuw (in Abas 1987: 42), the shift to Indonesian under the Japanese, constitutes 'a much greater revolution' than the declaration of Indonesian as the national language in the 1945 Constitution, which in itself was an important part of Indonesia's decolonisation.

Article 36 of the 1945 Indonesian Constitution reads: 'The national language shall be Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia)' (Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, 2003).⁶ In deeming Indonesian to be the national language at the proclamation of independence on 17 August 1945,⁷ the Indonesian leaders consciously rejected Dutch as the language of the new country. This decision was based on, first, the fact that it was the colonial language and not indigenous (that is, it was a deliberate rejection of the colonisers' language); and second, Dutch was not as widely used globally as English or French so it was not seen to be internationally useful.

While the decision to adopt Indonesian was in accordance with the declaration made at the 2nd Congress of Indonesian Youth in 1928⁸ that Indonesia would have 'one language,' it was spoken as a L1 by fewer than 5 percent of the population at independence (Pauuw 2009: 3). In comparison, Javanese, which was spoken by a large number of members of the educated elite, the country's leaders and almost half of the country's entire population, was rejected. As Dardjowidjo writes, 'most of the young nationalists spoke Dutch better than Malay' (1998: 37). The decision was partly made in recognition of the absence of codified hierarchal language in Indonesian, which is a complex feature of Javanese (Simpson 2007: 324). This makes Indonesian comparatively easier to learn.

The history of Indonesian as the lingua franca across the coastal areas of the archipelago also helped in its selection as the national language (Pauuw 2009: 3). Importantly, as it 'would not appear to confer unfair native language advantages on any *major*, numerically dominant ethnic group' (Simpson 2007: 323), the rejection of Javanese facilitated Indonesian becoming the language of national unity. Today, Indonesian is the most widely understood language

5 According to Simpson (2007: 327), the Japanese called the language 'Malay.'

6 Moeliono (1986: 26) argues that the wording in the 1945 Constitution does not equate to 'national language' but to 'state language.' There were no changes to Article 36 in the 1999 to 2002 amendments to the Constitution.

7 The Netherlands did not recognise Indonesian independence until December 1949. In November 1945, after re-colonising Indonesia, the Dutch authorities declared Indonesian a co-official language with Dutch (Moelino 1986: 27).

8 According to Abas (1987: 38), Indonesian was first used instead of Melayu (Malay) at the 1928 2nd Congress. Pauuw (2009: 3) notes that discussions were held in Indonesian at the 2nd Congress whereas they had been in Dutch at the 1st Congress in 1926.

across the country even though it is not the L1 of a majority of the population. Rather, large numbers of Indonesians speak, to name a few, Javanese, Sundanese, Balinese, and Mandarin or other Chinese languages as their L1, but attend school in Indonesian, where the learning of English is also compulsory from Junior Secondary level.

Interestingly, since the fall of the Suharto regime in 1998, there has been a softening in the official attitudes towards, and use of, Chinese languages. Following the alleged 1965 communist coup, the ‘Basic Policy for the Solution of the Chinese Problem’ was introduced in 1967 (Setijadi 2016: 143). Under this policy, Chinese-language schools were phased out and the use of Chinese script in public places was banned. According to Setijadi (2016: 143), these policies were part of an ideology that viewed ‘non-native’ languages as contrary to national unity. Most of the legislation was revoked by either Presidents B. J. Habibie (in office from 21 May 1998–20 October 1999) or Abdurrahman Wahid (in office from 20 October 1999–23 July 2001) as part of the *reformasi* policies adopted after the collapse of the Suharto regime. Some international or ‘national-plus’ schools (schools primarily for local students, but not under the auspices of the Indonesian Ministry of Education) now offer ‘classes delivered in a combination of Indonesian, English and Mandarin’ (Setijadi 2016: 145) and Chinese script is now seen in public (Setijadi 2016: 144–145). Whilst these changes do not affect the overall status of Indonesian, they do demonstrate a significant change in official attitudes to non-native languages, especially Chinese languages, and the country’s linguistic landscape.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Indonesia occupied both West Papua and the former Portuguese colony of Timor. As part of its policies of national unity through ‘Indonesianisation,’ Indonesian was imposed as the official language of both territories.

TIMOR-LESTE

There are few opportunities available to witness the processes involved in choosing languages for a new state, largely because new states themselves are relatively rare. One exception is the case of Timor-Leste, which gained independence in 2002. With its long history of colonisation, Timor-Leste serves as a fascinating case study of the choice of national, official and other languages.

Timor was declared a Portuguese colony from 1702. Decolonisation began in 1974 and in late November 1975 Timorese leaders declared independence.⁹ A week later, on 7 December, Timor was invaded by the Indonesian military, and it remained under Indonesian occupation until 1999. Under Portuguese colonial rule, Portuguese was the language of administration, but it was not widely used outside the capital of Dili. According to Hajek (2000), it was not until the 1950s that a large-scale Portuguese language education program for the colony was introduced. Under this program, by the mid-1970s, many East Timorese had attained a ‘rudimentary or otherwise’ understanding of Portuguese (Hajek 2000: 403). At the time of Portugal’s withdrawal in 1975, Portuguese was reportedly the L1 of less than 5 percent of the population (Afonso and Goglia 2015: 197), many of whom were members (and their families) of the ruling elite. Many of the remainder of the East Timorese had some knowledge of Portuguese but it was not widely used outside official interactions. Interestingly, one

⁹ Hajek (2000: 401) notes that despite Portuguese contact beginning in the 1500s, it was not until 1912 that Portugal achieved full control of the colony. In 1914 the island of Timor was formally split into Dutch Timor (West Timor) and Portuguese Timor (East Timor). The former Dutch Timor remains part of Indonesia.

consequence of Portuguese rule is that Tetun-Praça (hereafter Tetum)¹⁰ became the L1 of many residents of the colonial capital Dili, when previously the Mambai language had been dominant ([Hajek 2000](#)). Over time, 'Tetun-Prasa' has become the dominant form of Tetum spoken in Timor Leste.

At the beginning of Indonesian rule in 1975, Portuguese and Chinese dialects were banned and Indonesian made the official language. One effect was that Tetum became the language of solidarity for those opposed to Indonesian rule, a situation reinforced when, in the early 1980s, the Catholic Church made it the language of the liturgy. At the same time, as many of the exiled Timorese leaders spoke Portuguese, the Indonesian authorities promoted English in the belief that it would 'weaken the position of Portuguese amongst the educated elite' ([Hajek 2000](#): 406).

In 1998, the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorese (CNRT, Timorese National Resistance Council) published the Magna Carta which was to be the basis of Timor's post-independence constitution ([Hajek 2000](#); Taylor-Leech 2009). In the Magna Carta, Tetum was designated as the future country's 'national' language and Portuguese an 'official language' ([Hajek 2000](#): 408). Makoni and Severo suggest that this choice was a deliberate challenge to 'Indonesian and Australian domination' (2015: 157), but Taylor-Leech suggests that CNRT's intention was to restore 'the linguistic order of 1974/75' (2019: 302). Following a vote on whether to become an autonomous territory within Indonesia was firmly rejected in 1999, Timor-Leste was administered by the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) until 2002. Largely because most of the international military, police and advisors spoke neither Portuguese nor Tetum, and the people generally spoke better Indonesian than Portuguese, during the period of UNTAET administration both English and Indonesian became 'working languages' ([Macalister 2016](#): 334). This situation continues to this day (see below).

On independence in 2002, in accordance with the Magna Carta, the authorities made Tetum the national language and Portuguese and Tetum official languages. The decision to make Portuguese an official language enabled Timor to become a member of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) from which it received financial and other support for Portuguese language teacher training ([Afonso and Goglia 2015](#): 197). Initially, it was the government's intention that Portuguese would become the dominant and most widely used language, and that Indonesian would fade from use in 10 years ([Taylor-Leech 2009](#): 37). Whilst the dominance of Indonesian has decreased, due to the history of Portuguese as the language of colonial rule, some Timorese hold negative attitudes towards it, and many younger people prefer to learn English ([ABC Radio National 2004](#)). Due to the popularity of English among Timor's youth and the possible inclusion of Timor Leste in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which uses English as the sole working language ([Kirkpatrick 2010](#)), [Macalister \(2016: 340\)](#) questions how long Portuguese can maintain its importance. Similarly, [Hajek \(2000\)](#) and [Taylor-Leech \(2009\)](#) suggest that the importance of Portuguese may fade once the old Portuguese-speaking elite are no longer in control. However, in order for this suggestion to be realised, major changes would need to be made as all laws are at present written in Tetum and Portuguese.

10 Tetun-Praça (city Tetun) is sometimes referred to as Tetun Dili or Tetun Prasa. In Tetun, the language is called Tetun, but in English the spelling is Tetum, based on Portuguese orthography.

Part 1: Section 13 of Timor's Constitution clearly states the national and official languages; however Part VII: Section 159 on 'Working Languages' reads: 'Indonesian and English shall be working languages within the civil service side by side with official languages as long as deemed necessary' (Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, Section 159). The inclusion of English and Indonesian as working languages clearly recognises the historically unstable linguistic landscape in the country and the widespread use of English during the UNTAET years. Kerber (in [Spolsky 2018](#)) acknowledges the importance of English during the UNTAET period and its importance for communication with international agencies and the business community.

At the time of writing it is unclear when either or both languages will no longer be needed, although the results of the 2015 Population and Housing Census give some indication of the contemporary language landscape. The 2015 Census statistics shows that 30.6 percent of the population speak Tetum as their 'mother tongue,' while 55 percent speak it as their second language (hereafter L2) and a further 1.1 percent as their third language (hereafter L3) ([Statistics Timor-Leste 2016](#)). That is, more than 85 percent of the population speaks Tetum as L1, L2 or L3. Reflecting the relatively recent end to Indonesian occupation, just 0.2 percent of the population speak Indonesian as L1, however 6.1 percent speak it as a L2 or L3. That is, less than 7 percent of the population speak Indonesian. Interestingly, a higher proportion speak English as L1 (0.6 percent) but with only a combined total of 1.2 percent speaking it as a L2 or L3, the overall proportion of speakers is fewer than of Indonesian. In the case of Portuguese, 0.1 percent speak it as L1, 2.4 percent as L2 and 2.8 percent as L3 ([Statistics Timor-Leste 2016](#)). That is, the Census statistics show that whilst Tetum is the most widely spoken language, Indonesian remains a little more widely spoken than Portuguese (5.3 percent). However, the growth in Portuguese as L2 or L3 suggests that this could change in the future.¹¹ Nevertheless, as all Timor-Leste's land borders are with Indonesia, irrespective of any negativity towards the Indonesian occupation, Indonesian may need to remain part of the linguistic landscape for the foreseeable future.

The position of English is more complex: it is not as widely spoken as either Indonesian or Portuguese but, as is the case of New Caledonia (see below), Timor is located in a largely Anglophone region, which may mean that English (spoken by less than 2 percent of the population) remains at least a working language for some time to come. According to Leach *et al's* survey of tertiary students undertaken in Timor-Leste in 2010, 90 percent self-identify as fluent in Tetun-Dili, 78.5 percent in Indonesian, 10 percent in English and only 4.5 percent in Portuguese (2013: 121). In regards to language as criteria for national identity, 88.5 percent considered the ability to speak Tetum as 'Very important' and a further 8.5 percent as 'Fairly important,' while 52 percent consider the ability to speak Portuguese as 'Very important' and 31.0 percent as 'Fairly important'¹² (2013: 131). Interestingly, the figures for 'Very important' had not changed since 2007 although the figures for 'Fairly important' had increased from 7.5 percent in the case of Tetum and 28 percent in the case of Portuguese. On this basis, it appears that among Timor-Leste's future leaders, Portuguese continues to hold an important role in their attitudes to national identity.

11 According to Statistics Timor-Leste (2017), an analysis of the 2015 census data shows that for people 5 years and over, 62.5 percent of people speak, read and write Tetum, 30.8 percent speak, read and write Portuguese, 36.6 percent speak, read and write Indonesian and 15.6 percent of people speak, read and write English. The proportion of people who do not 'speak, read or write' Portuguese (39.3 percent) or Indonesian (38 percent) is far higher than the proportion that does.

12 Neither English nor Indonesian were included in the question about national identity.

FIJI

Fiji became independent from Britain in October 1970, almost 100 years after it became a British colony in 1874. Since then, Fiji has undergone significant political change, including becoming a republic following two coups in 1987.¹³ Fiji is ethnically diverse, both historically and as a result of migration policies implemented during the colonial era. According to the 2007 Census, 54 percent of the population are native Fijian and 38 percent are of Indian descent ([Fiji Bureau of Statistics 2017](#)).¹⁴ Most indigenous Fijians resident in Fiji speak iTaukei (Fijian) either as a L1 or L2. Similarly, Fiji Hindi¹⁵ is spoken by almost all Fijians of Indian ancestry although some speak another Indian language, such as Gujarati, at home. That is, Fiji Hindi is the L2 of at least some Indian Fijians. According to Mangubhai and Mugler (2003: 371) iTaukei and Fiji Hindi are spoken as L1 by around 95 percent of the population. Most of the remaining 5 percent speak English as L1.

Since independence, Fiji has changed its constitution on a number of occasions. In the original 1970 Constitution, there was no mention of a national language and the only reference to an official language was in terms of English as the 'official' language of Parliament ([Mangubhai and Mugler 2003: 371-372](#)). Section 4.1 of the 1997 Constitution read, 'The English, Fijian, and Hindustani languages have equal status in the State' ([Mangubhai and Mugler 2003: 372](#)). In 2003, the then Member of Parliament, Mr Samisoni Tikoinasau, argued that the lack of non-English versions of the Constitution meant that it was not understood by all Fijian citizens ([Mangubhai and Mugler 2003: 375](#)).¹⁶ Chapter 1 Article 3.3 of the most recent (2013) constitution specifically stipulates that the 'Constitution is to be adopted in the English language and translations in the *iTaukei* and Hindi languages are to be made available' ([Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013](#)). Importantly, translations of the Constitution in both languages are available, at least online ([Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013](#)). The wording of Article 3.3 is also important as it is the first time that iTaukei (previously referred to as 'Fijian') and Hindi (previously 'Hindustani') are used.¹⁷ This change indicates a shift from a colonial lexicon to a more decolonised one. Nevertheless, the use of 'Hindi' implies a more homogenous Indian linguistic population than was historically the case. As Siegel (1975) and Lynch (1998: 263) show, Indian migrants came from a wide range of language communities and did not necessarily speak Hindi. Moreover, the preeminent position of English is clear from Chapter 1 Article 3.4 which reads, 'If there is an apparent difference between the meaning of the English version of a provision of this Constitution, and its meaning in the iTaukei and Hindi versions, the English version prevails' ([Constitution of the Republic of Fiji 2013](#)). As such, English has a higher status than both iTaukei and Hindi.

13 There was a third coup in 2006.

14 According to the Fiji Bureau of Statistics (2018) 'there was no reliable collection of data on ethnicity in the 2017 Census' and consequently, statistics from the 2007 Census are used. Mangubhai and Mugler (2003: 370) note that the remaining 8 percent is composed for a diverse mix of 'Europeans,' Rotuman Islanders, other Pacific Islanders and 'others'. The Rotuman Islands were incorporated into Fiji in the colonial era.

15 Fiji Hindi, due to influences from other Indian languages which were spoken by Indian migrants to Fiji, has semantic differences to Hindi spoken in India. Verb conjugations are also simpler than standard Hindi.

16 Section 4 of the 1997 Constitution required translations of the Constitution be available in both Fijian and Hindustani. According to Mangubhai and Mugler (2006: 27) summaries were available but no full translations.

17 Mangubhai and Mugler (2003: 374-375) suggest that Hindustani is a more accurate word for the Fijian context.

In short, Fiji has a unique combination of languages with three official languages—an indigenous language, the language of the former colonial power, and an introduced migrant language—but no national language.

VANUATU

The French-English Condominium of the New Hebrides became the independent state of Vanuatu in 1980. With a population of around 272,000 and comprising 83 islands of which 65 are inhabited, and some 110 languages spoken, Vanuatu is considered the world's most linguistically diverse country per capita (Crowley 2006: 157). During the colonial era, France and Britain ran separate education and legal systems and the population was split into Anglophone and Francophone communities. Although the English and French education systems were merged at independence, there is still an unofficial separation line between regions where English or French were taught at school as schools have largely maintained their adherence to the pre-independence languages. Vanuatu remains the only place in the Pacific where the Anglophone and Francophone worlds meet (Crowley 2000).

At independence, the creole Bislama¹⁸ was designated the national language and three languages—English, French and Bislama—were made official languages. Vanuatu's designation of two colonial languages as official languages is unique. According to Crowley, the wording of the French version of the constitution indicates that the writers' intention was 'that Bislama would function as the official spoken language at the national level, while English and French would function as the official written languages' (2000: 51).

The decision to make Bislama the national language was the result of its neutral status between those leaders educated in English and those educated in French (Lynch 1998). Interestingly, all three languages—including Bislama which as a creole is not indigenous—were 'introduced during European colonisation' (Francois et al 2015: 3). According to the Executive Summary of the 2009 Census, Bislama is spoken at home by 34 percent of the population whilst English and French are spoken by 2 percent and 1 percent respectively (Vanuatu National Statistics Office 2015).¹⁹ Leach *et al.*'s survey of tertiary students shows 95 percent to be fluent in Bislama, 46 percent in English and 34 percent (2013: 87). In terms of language as a criterion for Vanuatuan national identity, 54.5 percent consider the ability to speak Bislama as 'Very Important' compared to 60 percent for English and 48.5 percent for French (Leach et al. 2013: 94).²⁰

In addition to designating the national and official languages, the Constitution stipulates that local (Vanuatu indigenous) languages are 'part of the national heritage' and should be protected (Government of the Republic of Vanuatu 1983: Chapter 1 Article 3:2), while the same article leaves the option open for other languages to be declared 'national languages' in the future (Crowley 2000). The growing importance of Bislama means that this is unlikely to occur.

According to Charpentier, while French and English 'theoretically' have equal status with Bislama, 'they are not equal in reality' as the number of Bislama speakers has increased at the expense of the other two languages (2006: 133). Charpentier also predicted that the number

18 Bislama (*bichelamar* in French) has a largely English-based lexicon.

19 The Census shows that 63 percent of the population speak a local language at home.

20 All percentages are lower than for 'Respect tradition and *kastom*'.

of French speakers would continue to decline. This prediction has proved correct and it is one of the reasons behind the French Government's financial support for the establishment of the Vanuatu National Bilingual University ('New Caledonia to Provide Funding' 2018),²¹ with support from the University of New Caledonia.

The prominent position given to Bislama is partly the consequence of support given to it by the New Hebrides National Party (later Vanua'aku Party) which encouraged its members to see 'Bislama not as the language of domination created by Europeans but as the language of survival and solidarity created by Melanesians' (Thomas 1990: 238). This encouragement helped to undermine the negative attitudes towards Bislama generated by the colonial powers and enabled its selection as a national language. Nevertheless, Bislama is not spoken by all ni-Vanuatu²² as their L1. Bislama is spoken by many urban ni-Vanuatu, particularly those resident in the capital of Port Vila and of Luganville, the country's second largest city as their L1, but in other parts of the country it is more commonly the L2 after a local indigenous language.

De Facto National Language Countries

The countries discussed in the section below are multilingual but have not specified any language as a national or official language even though a particular language may be used. As such, the general use of a language makes that language a *de facto* national or official language.

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

Papua New Guinea (hereinafter PNG) achieved independence in September 1975. The country is ethnically and linguistically diverse with 851 individual languages, 840 of which are living (Ethnologue 2019). According to Ethnologue (2019), twice as many languages are spoken in PNG than in Europe. This includes 30 languages spoken in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARB) which is going to the polls on 23 November 2019 to vote on independence (see below).

Between 1945 and independence, English was the language of administration in PNG as well as the language of the first years of formal education in government schools. In non-government schools, many of which were church run, *Tok Lotu* (church inspired pidgin) or *Tok Pisin* were used. The latter, formerly the language of rule in German New Guinea, was originally a pidgin but has undergone creolisation. Since independence, the use of Tok Pisin has become more widespread. It is now the L2 of more than 50 percent of the population and the L1 of many residents in urban centres. It has largely replaced Hiri Motu, which was the *lingua franca* of the former Australian Territory of Papua, in parts of that region (Mühlhäusler 2003: 2). According to Leach *et al.*'s survey of tertiary students, 78.7 percent indicated that they were 'fluent' in Tok Pisin, 55.9 percent in English and 5.2 percent in Hiri Motu (2013: 30). Interestingly, 56.5 percent of the students considered the ability to speak Tok Pisin as 'Very important' and a further 26.5 percent as 'Fairly important' for a person to be 'truly' Papuan New Guinea (Leach *et al.* 2013: 34-36). In contrast, only 1.5 percent considered it to be 'Not at all important.' The figures for English were 70.5 percent, 17 percent and 5.5 percent and for Hiri Motu were 9.5 percent, 23.5 percent and 28.5 percent. That is, more of the

21 The proposed university was originally referred to as 'Vanuatu National University.'

22 ni-Vanuatu is used locally to refer to citizens of Vanuatu.

country's future leaders consider English to be more important than Tok Pisin for national identity.

As noted above, Papua New Guineans made a conscious choice not to designate a national language at independence. According to May, this decision 'implicitly acknowledged the potential for conflict if one lingua franca were chosen over another' (2003: 292). The PNG Constitution does not specify a national or official language. However, Article 67 stipulates that literacy in Pisin, Hiri Motu or a vernacular is necessary for non-citizens to become a PNG citizen ([National Parliament of Papua New Guinea n.d.](#)).²³ As such, Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu are legally acknowledged, even though they are not the language of the Constitution, or of Parliament, which is English. At the same time, the absence of a named language means that there is no overt legal discrimination against any language.

Whilst it is difficult to predict whether Tok Pisin will be more overtly recognised as a *de jure* national or official language in PNG in the future, its transformation into a creole and the increase in the number of those who speak it as a L1 means that its designation as a *de jure* official language would not be out of place, possibly along with English.

SOLOMON ISLANDS

The ethnically and linguistically diverse country of Solomon Islands gained independence from Britain in 1978. According to [Ethnologue \(2019\)](#) it features 76 individual languages of which 73 are living and three extinct. As in PNG, there is no reference to a specific national or official language in Solomon Islands' Constitution, which is written only in English. However, unlike the PNG Constitution which identifies two languages in which applicants for citizenship need to be proficient, the only mentions of language in Solomon Islands' Constitution are in relation to criminal trials, and to the requirement that applicants for citizenship show 'respect for the culture, the language and the way of life of Solomon Islands' (Solomon Islands' Constitution, Chapter III, 20.4 f). There is however no definition of which language is needed.

Solomon Islands Pijin,²⁴ the country's lingua franca, is the *de facto* national language, whilst English is the *de facto* official language ([Jourdan 1990](#): 168). Despite being the country's lingua franca, Pijin held a marginal status in the Solomon Islands' linguistic landscape until recently ([Keesing 1990](#)). This was largely because of the negative attitudes towards it which emerged during the colonial era.

The *de facto* official language of the British Solomons Islands Protectorate was English from 1893, when the islands nominally came under British control, through to independence in 1978. Pijin was first introduced into Solomon Islands in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by those returning from labouring in the Queensland's sugar cane industry. According to Jourdan ([1990](#): 167-167; 172-173), Pijin was used by Solomon Islanders from different parts of the Protectorate to communicate and was spoken overwhelmingly by men. Since that time, Pijin of the Queensland cane fields has been creolised in Solomon Islands, hence Pijin is now a misnomer.

23 Article 67 applies to applicants who are not applying for citizenship by descent.

24 Solomons Pijin, Bislama (Vanuatu) and Tok Pisin (PNG) are collectively referred to as 'Melanesian Pijin.' There are differences in the lexicon but are largely mutually intelligible. All varieties have their roots in the Queensland canefields where Pijin developed as a means of communication between speakers of different languages. Tryon and Charpentier (2004) provide a good introduction to this issue.

At independence, Pijin was spoken mostly as L2 or L3 by many Solomon Islanders, but since independence its usage has spread and is now viewed 'as the panacea for the heterogeneity of the country' (Jourdan 1995: 141). With the urbanisation of Honiara drawing people from all over the country, Solomons Pijin is the main means of communication for many young urban Solomon Islanders. This is especially the case for those whose parents speak different languages, and who use Solomons Pijin in the home. Yet, it remains as a L2 for Solomon Islanders living outside the cities (Jourdan 2007). For instance, in Western Province Pijin has replaced Roviana which was previously widely used due to the influence of the Methodist Church (Keesing 1990). This expansion has encouraged Solomon Islanders to see Pijin as 'part of Solomons' cultural heritage and national identity' (Hicks 2017: 858). At the same time, Jourdan (2007: 34) suggests that the spread of Pijin is partly due to its non-alignment with any particular ethnic group.

In 1998, violence erupted near Honiara and continued until international a multinational taskforce, known as the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI), was deployed. During the years RAMSI was in place (2003–2017), there was no focus on local languages, although Jourdan suggests that the use of English by RAMSI Advisers, military and police personnel was 'bound to alter the language game' (2013: 280 fn 10). It remains to be seen what those changes—if any—involve. Nevertheless, while English remains the language of law, the widespread use of Pijin across the country and in Parliament may see it become the *de jure* national language in the future, rather than its present *de facto* status.

NATIONAL AND OFFICIAL LANGUAGE CHOICES IN FUTURE INDEPENDENT STATES

In November 2018 New Caledonians went to the polls to vote on whether the French territory should become an independent state. The result saw 56 percent of eligible votes cast opting to retain the territory's current status as a *sui generis* overseas collectivity within the French state and 44 percent of votes in favour of independence. While the overall result was not unexpected, the proportion of votes for independence was higher than had been expected. In accordance with the terms of the 1998 Noumea Accord between Kanak pro-independence leaders and the French government, New Caledonians will have the opportunity to vote on the same issue again in 2020. In another part of Melanesia, the people of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARB) will vote on 23 November 2019 on whether to secede from Papua New Guinea and form an independent state. These two polities are more similar than they may seem at first glance. As Maclellan and Regan (2018: 1) note, they are similar in population (New Caledonia: 270,000; Bougainville 300,000) and the major industry in both territories is mining. The linguistic landscape in each territory, however, is considerably different.

According to the 2014 census, the population of New Caledonia is 39.1 percent Kanak, 27.1 percent European, and 7.4 percent Caledonian. The remaining 28.4 percent includes people of Asian heritage and those from the Wallis and Fortuna Islands (Institute de la statistique et des études économiques Nouvelle-Calédonie, 2015). In addition to French, 28 Kanak languages are used across the territory, which for administrative purposes is broken into three provinces: North, South and Loyalty Islands.

The unexpected close result in the 2018 referendum and the potential electoral impact of demographic growth among the Kanak populations now mean that New Caledonians may well vote for independence in any future election.²⁵ In the context of the possible

25 See Chauchat (2019: 265) for a discussion of the possible timing of future elections.

decolonisation of New Caledonia, Section 4 of the Preamble to the Noumea Accord is important: ‘Le passé a été le temps de la colonisation. Le présent est le temps du partage, par le rééquilibrage. L’avenir doit être le temps de l’identité, dans un destin commun’ [‘The past was the time of colonisation. The present is a time of sharing and rebalancing. The future should be a time of identity in a shared destiny’] (Accord sur la Nouvelle-Calédonie 1998). What form the ‘shared destiny’ will take will become clearer over the next few years. The national or official language(s) of the potential new state will form an important element of the shared destiny but as of yet, the issue has not been formally addressed. Most assume that French, as the *lingua franca*, will have a prominent role. A small survey by Bissoonauth (2015: 282) for instance, shows that 83 percent of the population believe that French would remain the dominant language. As an example of this attitude, one respondent said, ‘French will stay the cement language, since it is the linking language among everybody. Everyone speaks more or less French’ (Bissoonauth 2015: 283). Whilst this respondent rules out the possibility of change, another of Bissoonauth’s informants recognises the possibility that a Kanak language might replace French. According to this informant, ‘[a] lot of Melanesians speak their languages and if there is a vote in favour of independence, France will not be linked to New Caledonia and Melanesians would favour their cultures, languages etc’ (Bissoonauth 2015: 283).

Given that many of the pro-independence leaders use French as a language in common and no one Kanak language is dominant, it is highly probable that French will remain the dominant language for the foreseeable future. Some New Caledonians, however, believe that due to the comparative lack of French speakers in the Pacific, English may be given a greater role in the event of independence. As an informant in a survey by Bissoonauth and Parish said: ‘we feel a little isolated ... because throughout the Pacific everyone speaks English. There aren’t many of us who speak French: Tahiti, Wallis and New Caledonia.’ (2017: 40). A respondent to another survey was even more direct: ‘we live in an Anglophone zone. It would be more useful for us to speak English and to preserve French as a historical language’ (Bissoonauth 2015: 283). For more than a decade, in recognition of New Caledonia’s location in a predominantly Anglophone region, local education policy has promoted the teaching of English from primary school. Already the impact of this policy is evident with 90 percent of respondents in one survey indicating that they had studied English at school (Bissoonauth and Parish 2017: 45–46). Whilst it is unclear how New Caledonians will vote in future referenda, discussions about the preferred language configurations for a possible independent New Caledonia are needed.

Thirty languages are spoken in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville where the use of any individual language or dialect constitutes a ‘marker of political identity’ (Tryon 2005: 31). Most of the population speaks Tok Ples (the local vernacular) as their L1, although no more than 20 percent speak any one language. According to the Bougainville Audience Survey (Autonomous Bougainville Government 2017: 9), 93 percent of Bougainvilleans speak Tok Pisin, which as the *lingua franca* serves as a means of communication across the various language communities. Importantly, Tok Pisin is not ‘owned’ or associated with any specific language community which means that should Bougainvilleans vote for independence, it is probable that it would serve as, at least, a *de facto* national or official language. Yet, the language for the potential new state has not yet figured in discussions about the independence referendum scheduled on 23 November 2019, but if voters opt for independence, then language might be a topic for discussion in the not too distant future.

Conclusion

The discussion on national and official languages in independent states and other territories of the Asia-Pacific shows a diversity of approaches to languages and language configurations. It demonstrates that decolonisation can be a motivating factor in rejecting a colonial language as a national (Indonesia), but in more cases, the state has adopted the colonial language as a national or official language in either a *de jure* or *de facto* manner (Timor-Leste, Fiji, Vanuatu, PNG). The decision not to adopt a local language is more inclusive than may be initially recognised as it means that the speakers of that language are not prioritised over speakers of other languages. An unanticipated result may be that it also enables the people to engage in global affairs more than otherwise would be the case. In the absence of viable alternatives, it is likely that French would remain at least a *de facto* official language in an independent Kanaky (if that becomes New Caledonia's independent name). If the decision of Bougainvilleans is for independence, it is unclear whether it will take the same route as PNG and not designate any language as a national or official language, or whether it will specify a local language, which may include Tok Pisin, as at least an official language.

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